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SUBJECT: LEBANON: AOUNIST DEPUTY PM CAUSES DRAMA AT CABINET MEETING

REF: BEIRUT 1170

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) In an October 22 meeting with the Ambassador, Cultural Affairs Minister (and prominent Beirut Sunni community leader) Tamam Salam recounted the previous night's cabinet meeting, claiming it went well except for Deputy PM Issam Abou Jamra's dramatics. According to Salam, Abou Jamra insisted that the cabinet designate him certain powers, as well as provide him office space in the Grand Serail, and eventually left the session to declare to the press that he may boycott future sessions until his demands are met. Salam accused Abou Jamra of politicizing the issue to boost Christian support for Abou Jamra's long-time friend and party leader, Michel Aoun, who purportedly lost a measure of Christian support after his recent trip to Iran. A recent study by a U.S.-funded NGO, IFES, confirms our analysis that the 2009 parliamentary elections will be very close and will hinge on Christian votes. Separately, Salam expressed hope that a meeting between Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah and majority leader Saad Hariri would calm Shia-Sunni tensions, prevalent since the May clashes. Salam predicted that resolution of the Shebaa Farms issue would strip Hizballah of its legitimacy while better positioning Lebanon to dialogue with Israel. End summary.

ABOU JAMRA'S DRAMATICS AIMED
AT GAINING CHRISTIAN SUPPORT

12. (C) Prior to an October 22 signing ceremony for two projects financed under the U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation, Ambassador and PolOff sat down with independent, March 14-nominated Cultural Affairs Minister Tamam Salam in his office. Salam, who participated in the previous night's five-hour cabinet meeting, characterized the meeting as "good," but added that the ministers were intentionally avoiding addressing contentious issues. Nevertheless, he said, the cabinet had managed to make major decisions, such as appointing the new Lebanese Armed Forces Commander.

13. (C) However, Salam relayed, Deputy PM and member of Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), Issam Abou Jamra, has been problematic from the outset of the cabinet formation.

Salam said that Abou Jamra, who demanded the cabinet designate him additional powers, as well as give him an office in the Grand Serail (reftel), had continued to raise this issue at every cabinet meeting. Salam described Abou Jamra as "upset from the beginning of the meeting," and said he stormed out at one point when the cabinet turned to other issues. According to Salam, a few ministers successfully encouraged Abou Jamra to return to the meeting. (Note: Several previous deputy PMs simultaneously served as ministers with portfolios, so the question of their powers had not been an issue in the past. Former PM Rafiq Hariri chose to designate a set of duties for his deputy, Issam Fares. End note.)

14. (C) Salam noted that PM Fouad Siniora calmly explained that neither the constitution nor the Taif agreement mention the deputy PM position. According to Salam, Siniora suggested that the cabinet was not the best forum to address the matter, and that if there were a call to amend the constitution to institutionalize Deputy PM powers, then Siniora would be amenable. One minister reportedly proposed that Siniora hold a separate discussion with Abou Jamra to resolve the issue, at which point the cabinet turned its attention to other issues.

15. (C) After another hour, Salam said, Abou Jamra "quietly and peacefully" informed Siniora he was leaving, and departed without catching anyone's attention. Salam said that 15 minutes later, Abou Jamra's public statements hinting he would boycott future sessions surprised the ministers, who were still meeting together. Salam deduced that Abou Jamra

BEIRUT 00001513 002 OF 002

was politicizing the issue to show that he was defending Christian rights. Salam believes that Abou Jamra's actions were meant to draw attention away from Aoun's recent visit to Tehran and regain the Christian support Aoun's trip supposedly cost him.

NASRALLAH-SAAD MEETING
WILL BE GOOD FOR THE SUNNIS

16. (C) Salam is from a prominent Sunni family in Beirut (his father, Saeb Salam, served as Prime Minister in six cabinets between 1952 and 1973). He commended the efforts taken by majority leader Saad Hariri to ease Shia-Sunni tensions since the May clashes, highlighting the expected meeting between Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah and Saad as the most positive development. Salam acknowledged that bitterness remained between the two sides, which he believes a Nasrallah-Hariri meeting would quell. According to Salam, Saad Hariri enjoyed the support of the Sunni community to meet Nasrallah. Ultimately, he said, the Sunnis would forgive Hizballah as long as the organization did not try to "dominate" Lebanon again. Salam explained that most Lebanese view Hizballah as a political/military faction that enjoys major popular support, not as a terrorist organization. He said that if Israel withdrew from Shebaa Farms, then Hizballah would no longer have a legitimate reason to retain its arms. Furthermore, Salam argued, a resolution on Shebaa would better position Lebanon to dialogue with Israel.

COMMENT

17. (C) FPM leader Michel Aoun has received criticism from some in the Christian community following his visit to Tehran. Both March 8 and March 14 are expected to focus considerable resources on the key Christian districts. A non-attributable, internal paper on the expected outcome of the 2009 election by a U.S.-funded NGO, IFES, indicated that there is no clear winner for 48 seats of the 128 seats up for vote. These are primarily in the Christian districts of Zghorta, Koura, Kesarwan, and Metn, and the mixed districts of Baabda, Aley, Zahle, West Bekaa, and "Beirut One", one of

the three districts in the capital. The study predicted that March 14 is likely to win 41 seats and March 8 39 seats. With the Christian vote so critical, it is not surprising to see Aoun and his party members, including Abou Jamra, using every angle they can to woo Christian votes. March 14 would do well to step up its own efforts in these key regions -- unified lists will be critical, as will courting independent Christians and the Armenian Tashneq. End comment.

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